

ART. IX.—*Some Statistics showing the extent of the damage done to members of the Medical Profession by the abuse of Alcohol.*

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[Read 13th July, 1893.]

A very valued friend of mine stated some time since his conviction that in this colony, and up to date, alcohol was the causal agent in effecting the physical and moral ruin of about twelve per cent. of the male population with whom he was acquainted. As he is a highly cultivated man this proportion would be under that obtaining for the community in general. I thought his judgment was biased and told him so, but set to work to find what data were available for the purpose of ascertaining the accuracy of his opinion.

The only feasible plan appeared to be the tracing of the career of a number of people I had known for periods as lengthy as possible, and the estimation of the number whose health or whose prospects in life had been distinctly injured by the abuse of alcohol. If, however, the conclusions were to be of any value the careers of everyone I had been acquainted with must also be followed, and not simply of those whose morbid habits brought them into notoriety. In order to do this it ultimately became necessary to limit consideration entirely to members of the medical profession graduating at the Melbourne University, because it then became possible to make calculation on the whole body of graduations in the medical school, and the fallacy just referred to was eliminated. The objection to the method is that it takes account of the habits of men in one occupation only—an occupation, which, by reason of its exhausting and irregular character, gives a strong filip to moral decrepitude.

In the *University Calendar* for 1881-82 there are fifty-six Bachelors of Medicine on the list, of whom forty-three may be classed with Cæsar's wife as regards the abuse of alcohol. Of the remainder, twelve, or about twenty-one per cent., were decidedly

injured by the excessive use of alcohol. Some of them practised allied vices (opium and chloroform). If the thirteen be included, the percentage rises to about twenty-three. The great majority of the thirteen are now deceased, and their deaths were certainly hastened by the same causes.

In the *University Calendar* for 1883-84 there are eighty-six Bachelors of Medicine on the list, of whom ten, or about twelve per cent., certainly used alcohol in excess, and were much injured thereby in every respect. Some of these ten are included in the thirteen above mentioned, but several of the thirteen had died in the interval.

In the *University Calendar* for 1885-86 there are 106 Bachelors of Medicine on the list, of whom twelve, or about eleven per cent. became distinct alcoholics.

In all these cases the habits of intemperance began, I believe, subsequent to their entry into student life, in most cases they were not pronounced until leaving it. Whatever may be the value of these figures the real truth is, if anything, understated. The diminution in the percentage in the more recent years may, or may not be fallacious; it may be due possibly to increasing civilisation in the colony, or it may be due on the other hand to the shortness of the interval which has elapsed, and consequent anticipation of results. Further, I find it much more difficult to trace the movements of the more numerous graduates in recent years.

Again emphasising the fact that the conclusion may be understated, but is certainly not overstated, it can only be described as appalling. That such a number of men who have been reared, as Carlyle puts it, "at infinite trouble and expense," and who have qualified themselves by a course of long and severe study to practice a most interesting profession, should then pass into the world to obstruct, and not assist, social progress, to become not objects of respect, as cultivated and useful citizens, but a by-word and reproach, can only excite the most profound dismay.

Be it observed that the figures in themselves warrant no conclusion whatever on the vexed question, whether alcohol is the cause or the consequence of destruction, or both. Whether, in other words, alcoholism is a symptom of moral deterioration, or whether moral deterioration is a symptom of alcoholism, or

whether they mutually interact. They further in no way indicate any specific remedy. The broad fact remains, that of the graduates in medicine of the Melbourne University, at or about the years named, about one in seven became social wrecks, the proximate cause of the disaster being, what the total abstainers designate, in the words of Robert Hall, "liquid fire and distilled damnation."

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